

Lexington Theatre: Joy Of Summer Season

by Brook Street

The River Valley enjoyed a summer crowded with superb cultural events. Tanglewood, Lake George Opera, Mac-Haydn all had glorious seasons with record attendance.

The joy of the Summer Season, however, was Lexington Theatre. The two venerable rival companies at Williamstown, Mass. and Woodstock, New York could not boast seasons of such sustained artistic accomplishment as the young, energetic players at Lexington Theatre enjoyed in the second season of their ascendancy.

At Williamstown Playhouse, New York Times critic, Richard Eder, found the production of Shaw's "Misalliance," "successful, not because it was perfect, but because it revealed the play as more remarkable than it is generally held to be."

CHRONICLE critic, Kathi Berke, complained that George Abbott and Phillip Dunning's play "Broadway" produced at Williamstown "creaked as though it were a model T. . ." Miss Berke admired Williamstown's Second Company for its "integrity" but found David Mamet's new play "Squirrels", very unsatisfying" despite the "energy and conviction" of the players.

At Woodstock, that revered company suffered an all time low with a production of Agatha Christie's "Ten Little Indians" which was so dull that it could easily be awarded the Grand Malaise Award of Summer Season 1977.

Lexington's three final productions of John Ford's "Tis Pitty Shees a Whore," Otis Bigelow's "The Prevalence of Mrs. Seal" and J.M. Barrie's "Quality Street" were unflaggingly brilliant.

"Tis Pitty Shees a Whore" proved to be a stunning coup du theatre. Reaching back 400 years to produce John Ford's numbing tragedy of incestuous love was a risk that paid off in terms of Box Office and the satisfaction of high art.

Critical opinion of "Tis Pitty" over the centuries often foundered because of the subject matter which seemed a moral cliff hanger. Yet Ford had brave champion's through the centuries. David Erskine Baker in 1764 noted of "Tis Pitty," that "There are some particulars in it both with respect to conduct, character, spirit and poetry, that would have done honor to the pen of the immortal Shakespeare." Charles Lamb in 1808 said "Ford was of the first order of poets, he sought for sublimity, not by parcels in metaphors or visible images, but directly where she has her full residence in the heart of man." Maurice Maeterlinck in 1895 compared Ford to Racine. Twentieth Century poet T.S. Eliot voiced the traditional objection to "Tis Pitty" but had to admit that "Ford was able to manipulate sequences of words in blank verse in a manner which is quite his own. . . a quality which any poet might envy."

This kind of critical acknowledgment encourages the producing of an ancient novelty like "Tis Pitty." But often such a courageous undertaking cannot withstand modern footlight reality and the revival becomes a puzzling flop, a fallen oak of distant antiquity incapable of new life.

Lexington's "Tis Pitty" under the inspired direction of Oakley Hall was a miracle of life and spirit. The complexity of action, plot and sub plot was carried forward wonderfully under Mr. Hall's unfailing eye. The casting was well nigh perfect. The players were able to project Ford's rich language with admirable clarity, bringing to the ear Ford's linguistic music and the immediate understanding of every utterance. In such a balanced ensemble

of thespians they all seemed stars by way of the perfection each brought to his role. The Annabella of Sofia Landon and Giovanni of Steven Patterson were as exalted in their short circuited love as Romeo and Juliet always are in Shakespeare's great play. Jani Brenn's Putana was incomparable and Steven Rothblat as Bergetto was devastating. Bergetto's death scene is a fantastic peering into the fragility of life and the swiftness of death. There is a musical equivalent in Mozart's Don Giovanni where in the murder scene of the Commendatore the composer paints graphically in a few sweeping measures all the evil in the act of murder. The problematic role of Hippolita was played with such energy and conviction by Winship Cook that her death scene became a high point of the evening. Giovanni's final words "O I bleed fast! Death thou'rt a guest long looked for, I embrace thee and thy wounds: O my last minute comes. Where ere I go, let me enjoy this grace, freely to view my Annabella's face," engulfed the stunned audience in tragedy!

The other risky production of Lexington Season 77 was the world premier of Otis Bigelow's play, "The Prevalence of Mrs. Seal" which was a triumph of Box Office and Art. If this marvelous Bigelow play doesn't soon arrive on Broadway then the theatre is in worse shape than many claim! Amid all the thumping non language and ugly linguistic noise of so many contemporary playwright's it is delightful shock to discover a contemporary writer whose language is beautiful, whose style is so sophisticated and whose characters ring so true. The cast could not be bettered anywhere. Sofia Landon as Mrs. Seal out did herself. One is left without superlatives, adequate to describe the magic and verbal musicality Miss Landon produced in her long first scene. Only the first scene of the Marchallin in Strauss's Rosenkavalier has the emotional power which Bigelow invests in Mrs. Seal's part. Steven Nesbit ran Miss Landon a close second as Harry. Jani Brenn, James Goodwin Rice and Richard Zobel were side splitting as Mrs. Pilgrim, Smith and Doctor Porteous. Bigelow's deft mixture of humor and the bizarre has an ever present underpinning of the eternal problem man faces in handling the "gift of Life."

"Quality Street" J.M. Barrie's Classic comedy was Lexington's final production. It was all beauty, sentiment and high style under Michael Van Landingham's direction. Humor filled the evening and laughter bubbled over all night. The cast again was superb. By an admirable combination of understatement and high humor they successfully skirted the trap of slapstick. Sofia Landon's Miss Phoebe was by turns radiant, poetic, touching and hilarious. Steven Nesbit as Valentine gave his best performance of the season. Jani Brennan as Miss Susan reminded us again that she is the best character actress troding the boards in or about the Hudson River Valley.

Talent, dedication and hard work were the ingredients of Lexington Theatre's achievement. Sets and costumes were highly imaginative, a triumph of limitation of means. The company could boast a resident composer in Joseph Lyons. His original music for "Tis Pitty", "Mrs. Seal" and "Quality Street" added a unique effectiveness to these productions. The acting of the entire company was on an exceptionally high plane of excellence. And yet one would have to single out Sofia Landon as the Best Actress of Summer '77.

River Valley audience response this season shows their approval of reaching back 400 years for a play like "Tis Pitty," discovering a brilliant contemporary work like "Mrs Seal" and enjoying a 20th Century Classic like "Quality Street." Their response clearly shows too their aversion to the cheap "Cotton Candy" productions that often pass for art works along the Summer Theatre Trail.